

Chapter 8

Home Again on Garfield Drive

Joe and I sat in our car across from our old house and took in the view. It wasn't pretty. The place had seen better days. To begin with, Garfield Drive was full of cracks and small potholes that led to a driveway filled with weeds poking up through the broken concrete. In a weed patch formerly known to us as a beautiful front yard stood the remnants of what was once a majestic old maple tree. It now was a four-foot high stub that was left to slowly decay. The mailbox out front was leaning at a forty-five degree angle and had the look of a place where only bills accumulate.

The house needed a new roof, but otherwise seemed livable—just worn out. Interestingly, the curtains that one might normally find on the front picture window had been replaced with a large quilt that completely blacked out any view of the interior. You can draw your own conclusions. Joe offered, "Crack house." That description was the opposite of our idyllic childhood existence where the milkman made his deliveries to our side door each week and my father's laundry was carefully placed inside that same unlocked door on top of the washing machine every Friday.

Each week five identical folded white shirts with heavy starch would be delivered and five dirty ones removed. These were part of my father's carefully groomed attire at the Fort Benjamin Harrison Army Finance Center where he was one of the higher-ranking civilians in the finance department. He also bought three new suits every year at the annual one-day suit sale at the William H. Block department store in Indianapolis. Because of his frugal nature, those shirts would also serve as his after-work leisurewear until their next laundry cycle. An open collar and rolled up sleeves signaled the shirt could now be worn mowing the lawn or washing the car. That's about as casual as my father would ever be seen. I have only one memory of ever playing catch with my father in the side yard and he was resplendent in his slightly wrinkled white shirt.

We pulled up in order to see the back yard. There, still standing, was the basketball goal and concrete slab that my parents had built when I entered high school and searched for Hoosier stardom. It was now littered with toys and other discarded debris. The rim held no net, which was a sign of poor judgment and suspect character in a state that treated the sport like a religion. It was not at all unusual to have a basketball goal of some kind on your property in Indiana when I grew up there.

In fact, if you didn't have one, then neighbors knew one of three things about you. You had no children at all, you had no boys in the litter, or you were a foreigner and probably spent hours secretly kicking around a black and white ball in your back yard while occasionally bouncing it off your head. Remember, there was no

such thing as organized girls basketball back then, and soccer was decades away from becoming the ubiquitous babysitter that now dominates youth sports.

However, the Kelly property was unique in that it actually had a flat slab of concrete to play on. It was small, but flat. Most goals just were planted in dirt or were secured over garages on driveways that sloped toward the street. Thus, your basic shooting height might range from ten feet at the basket to twelve feet as you worked your way toward the street. That will really screw you up when you get to a normal court.

The Kelly court was also unique because of how it was built. Joe, like many kids in our area, got a summer job in high school working for the State Highway Department of Transportation. He basically did flunky work hauling stuff around for the next layer of clock-watchers higher up in the bureaucracy who performed flunky work for someone else. Joe had the good fortune of working with a crew led by the Booker brothers.

The four Booker brothers did not live in Glenville. I knew that only because there were no black people residing within the city limits. At the time, I never gave that oddity of homogenous living a single thought, but later heard strong rumors that Klan activity had been a part of Glenville history and the lingering memory of it might still have influenced the make-up of our quaint little town.

So, the Booker brothers lived in a nearby town and taught Joe the ways of state employment. First, slow down. Second, take a coffee break. Third, get ready for lunch. However, in spite of working the system like everyone else, Joe respected the Booker brothers for their work habits once they decided it was time to work. They also treated Joe well and liked him. I remember the first time Joe came home from work and told me about the brothers.

“These guys have some strange names: A, B, C, and D Booker.”

“So,” I naturally asked, “What do the letters stand for?”

“Nothing. They stand for A, B, C, and D.”

“You’re telling me they had letters for names?” “That’s right,” Joe replied in a matter-of-fact fashion. “I was told by ‘A’ that his parents were illiterate and just went with single letters so they wouldn’t have to write their names. ‘A’ was the oldest, ‘B’ and ‘C’ were twins, and ‘D’ was just an accident.”

I had no reason not to believe Joe, and when I met the Booker brothers I confirmed the story. Joe had mentioned to them about my parents considering an investment in a basketball court and they told him they could build it on a weekend for a good price. A “good price” was all that my father needed to hear. He didn’t care what race they were or how many vowels they had in their names. They did a good job with the court and probably created a little stir on Garfield Drive when they all showed up that first morning jammed into their old pick-up truck.

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Joe and I drove up Garfield Drive and made the turn on Jefferson Street (where Uncle Shorty and Aunt Meta had lived) and on to Madison, Polk, Monroe, and Winfield streets. You get the idea. Westside Village was into presidents. The area was much more fully developed now and stretched out to the Glenville Water Tower and beyond. That silver tower, as with small towns all over the Midwest, hovered above the community and served as an announcement that you had arrived in Glenville. As a kid, it seemed gigantic and mysterious. We could see it from our backyard and when my parents first moved to Indiana there were just open fields between the tower and our house. Westside Elementary, our local grade school, also looked up at the tower from the classroom windows. As young kids, the water tower dominated our very existence; we seemed to live our lives in its shadow.

Over the years the area between our house and the tower eventually filled with starter homes built mostly in the 1950s and 60s. They now sell in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range, according to the real estate guide we picked up at breakfast. You might be able to pay for a bathroom for that amount in southern California.

We looped back to Garfield Drive and again drove past our home. This time we looked across the street and realized how ugly the view was from our house. Maybe that's why a quilt now covered the front window. When we were kids, living across from the loading dock of the local supermarket and adjacent drugstore simply meant we didn't have far to go to run a quick errand. It was also a source of income in the summer when Joe and I unloaded produce trucks at night and were rewarded with cash. While violating child labor laws, we really didn't care that our house looked out into the backside of a supermarket. It was convenient. Now it didn't look so great.

A few doors down, we stopped in front of the old Conrad house to reminisce about The Garfield Gang. Yes, that's right. Joe and I were part of a gang. Thugs. Enforcers. Well, actually we put on garage sales, had a lemonade stand, and held dog show competitions for the neighborhood (which were most certainly later ripped off to create "Letterman's Stupid Pet Tricks"). We even put on a world-class magic show when Joe received a magic kit for his birthday one year. He was, naturally, the Master of Ceremonies. We charged twenty-five cents per ticket for that one and made a killing. We made even more money from our concession stand where we featured bologna sandwiches on Wonder Bread with Miracle Whip. It's amazing how much profit you can pocket when you take everything from your parents' kitchen and have no cost of goods.

The Conrad brothers were the same age as the Kelly boys (around seven and ten); so it was a natural fit to create a gang. We envisioned something akin to Spanky and Our Gang, but likely without Buckwheat and Darla since there were no black kids around and no local girl could ever match up to Darla. We were very selective about who could join. Just because you lived on Garfield Drive didn't mean you could be in the gang. Phil Duncan lived just a couple of doors down from the Conrad brothers and he was a cool kid—a year older than Joe. Plus, he had a

basketball goal with a dirt court and a huge field next door where we could play baseball and football. He was a lock for membership.

The Bender brothers down the street barely squeaked in just because we felt sorry for them and we needed someone to run errands for us. They were younger and did what they were told. Of course, our next-door neighbor, Luke Jackson, had a guaranteed spot in the gang. Not that he needed us, but we needed him for any sort of credibility that we might be able to generate outside of Garfield Drive. If for any reason at all we got into trouble with other kids outside the gang, all we had to do is mention Luke. That would end any and all harassment.

The Hunt brothers wanted to join the gang in the worst way even though they didn't technically live on Garfield Drive. They were over on Jefferson. They begged us. Again, these guys were exactly the same age as Joe and me. Parents in Indiana at that time must have had a mandatory waiting period of roughly three years before having sex again. That seemed to be the appropriate spacing between kids in our neighborhood. The older one could best be described as whiney and the younger one farted all the time and blew snot out his nose when he sneezed. He never covered his mouth and nose; just blew it out. We weren't going to have that in our gang. In spite of the parents' intervention on the boys' behalf, we held firm. The vote was 8-0 against. I felt a real rush of empowerment at the time.

We once considered girls in the gang very briefly since there were a lot of girls on Garfield Drive and on the surrounding streets. Joe was convinced that girls would be a disruptive force within the gang and that we were heading down a slippery slope by even considering it. I had no idea what an ideological slippery slope was at the time, but I could tell by Joe's insistence that it was no place I wanted to go. When Sally Markham approached the group for inclusion, Joe convinced everyone that her red hair and abundance of freckles signaled a rare disease that could prove contagious. The group wisely avoided that calamity and never raised the issue of girls in the Garfield Gang again. Naturally, that all changed when the older guys' hormones kicked in, but the gang had run its course by that time and was ready for disbandment.

The Garfield Gang was not only wonderfully community-minded in offering a generous slate of reasonably priced activities for the neighborhood, but we were ahead of our time as an outdoor adventure club. We could have been called the Sierra Club if we had known what a Sierra was at the time. We went on long-distance hikes through the cornfields all the way out to Bird Island, which was almost out of sight of the water tower. No one knew why the spot was called Bird Island. We never saw any birds there. It basically was a mud hole surrounded by a grove of trees. We saw lots of frogs, but no birds. But since Luke Jackson was the one who originally found it and deemed it to be Bird Island, we weren't going to argue about the name.

In the winter, we would track wild animals in the snow. We saw tracks made by rabbits, squirrels, birds, dogs, and either a leopard or a lion. There was great

debate over the issue. We camped out under the stars in the summer—sometimes in a back yard, but more often in our carport where the gentle evening breeze blew through gaps between the fiberglass panels. I don't claim to be much of an outdoor enthusiast these days, but I still yearn for a good night's rest primarily out in the open and only partially protected by a carport.

The only real mischief we engaged in was creating a stuffed dummy that looked vaguely like a teenage boy, then placing it carefully in the middle of a street at night with ketchup poured all around the head and a bicycle tossed askew nearby. The gang would then hide in the nearby bushes waiting for a car to come screeching to halt. The driver would always jump out screaming, "Are you okay?" A moment of silence would pass as the adult took a closer look and realized the prank. The laughter would start to drift out of the bushes as the driver got back into his car yelling something to the effect of "You stupid kids. You could have caused me to wreck my car!" Like that was really going to happen.

Joe and I feel sorry to this day for taking that little prank one step further. Our mother was unfailing in her nightly visit to the one bathroom in our house. This generally occurred around midnight or so. Joe and I had the bright idea to make use of our crash-scene dummy by leaving him sitting on the toilet, grinning at our mother when she flipped on the light. The ensuing screams were not pretty—nor were the threats she made toward us soon thereafter. However, I'm pretty sure she was extra cautious in her nightly ritual ever since.

Joe and I pulled away from the curb and looped one more time back to our old house. This time we pulled forward and sat in front of the next-door neighbor's house where Luke Jackson grew up. No description of our neighborhood, the Kelly boys' childhood, and the Garfield Gang could be complete without examining Luke in greater detail.